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## ABSTRACT

A study examined the challenges faced by Kayenta Unified School District (KUSD) and outlying communities on the Navajo Reservation in their efforts to adequately provide educational opportunities for their transfer students with special needs. Interviews were conducted with six students from 4th grade through high school; seven parents; special education personnel from eight area schools; and transportation personnel, office staff, and the director of special education at KUSD. No school had a transition plan and communication between schools was inadequate. It could take 4-5 months to receive records from another school, and records often arrived incomplete and out of order. Parents often did not inform the school of their intention to transfer their child, and did not inform the new school of prior services received. KUSD schools practiced inclusion and while most children had good experiences with the special education department, the transition from a pullout program to one of complete inclusion was hard. Since students with special needs and their nondisabled peers were treated the same with regard to transportation, children who transferred in from outlying communities might spend excessive time on the bus. Children had a difficult time making friends in their new school. The children who looked, walked, or acted "different" continued to have a hard time after the transition. Recommendations include all educators assuming responsibility for communication and good record keeping. (TD)

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## THE TRANSITION OF SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS TO KAYENTA FROM OUTLYING COMMUNITIES: PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS

### Introduction

The Navajo Reservation is located in the Four Corners area of the Southwestern United States. The reservation extends into Arizona, New Mexico and Utah, covering approximately 27,000 square miles. It is the largest reservation in the United States and yet only about 250,000 people live in these traditional Diné (Navajo) lands. The Reservation is home to more than a dozen national monuments, tribal parks, Anasazi ruins and other historical sites. Kayenta is located 23 miles south of Monument Valley, a holy place to The People (the meaning of their traditional name Diné). It is here the ancestors of the Navajo, First Man and First Woman originated. People travel from all over the world to view the beautiful sandstone and monoliths of the valley. Kayenta is one of the largest communities on the Reservation, with a population of approximately 6,500 people. This is the home of the Kayenta Unified School District (KUSD).

Today the Navajo Nation is striving to sustain a viable economy for an ever-increasing population that currently surpasses a quarter of a million. Twenty five miles away from Kayenta the Black Mesa Coal Mine is a major employer of the residents of Kayenta. Indian Health Services and the local schools are other major employers. Other businesses include: three hotels, one supermarket, two laundromats, a video store, one bank and several restaurants and gas stations. There is also a branch of the Navajo Department of Law Enforcement as well as other Navajo Nation social service providers. Some people still live traditionally on family homesteads in hogans or other houses with no electricity or running water. Many own or rent modern homes with satellite dishes and every other convenience.

The student population of KUSD is heterogeneously made up of children from a wide range of home situations. Some parents are concerned and informed about the educational needs and abilities of their students. Some are not. Extended family units are common, and in some cases children are raised entirely by their grandparents or other relatives. In many cases children learn Navajo as their first language.

Kayenta Unified School District is comprised of four schools. The Primary school serves children from kindergarten to second grade while the Intermediate school provides services to children in grades three to five. The Middle school is for children from sixth to eighth grade and Monument Valley High School (MVHS) is for students

in grades nine to twelve. The approximate number of children enrolled in KUSD is 2,627. About ten percent of these students receive services through their special education department. As Kayenta is considered a hub on the Reservation, many children from smaller communities attend KUSD schools at some point in their educational careers. On the Reservation, children may attend any public school that they choose. Schools are not assigned by geographical region. As a matter of fact, families living in a community 65 miles away may choose to transport their children 20 miles to the KUSD bus stop so their child can attend school in Kayenta despite the fact that their community has very similar educational opportunities.

Unique to the KUSD is a cooperative venture between the District and Northern Arizona University's Center for Excellence in Education (NAU-CEE) called the Reaching American Indian Special/Elementary Educators (RAISE) program. RAISE is dedicated to providing education leading to a bachelor's degree in elementary and special education and is funded by a grant from the Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS). The program is delivered to cohorts of students in their local communities who spend one and one-half years together (Sealander, Eigenberger, Peterson, Shellady, and Prater, in press).

RAISE has been described as a program transported to the reservation. This *transporting* enables local participants to complete a degree program while remaining with their families, retaining their jobs, and sustaining their support networks (Heimbecker, Minner, & Prater, 2000). Moreover, the marriage of theory and practice set in the context of the primarily Navajo culture, strengths, and needs are important aspects in the cohort program (Sealander, Eigenberger, Peterson, Shellady, and Prater, in press).

### Purpose

The purpose of this paper and research is to inform interested individuals of the challenges faced by the Kayenta Unified School District and outlying communities in their efforts to adequately provide educational opportunities for their transfer students with special needs. Since children and families are free to choose the school students will attend there are often transfers for personal reasons, which are never disclosed. There are also many students who transfer into the District after completing the eighth grade in a community that does not offer a secondary education program. Information regarding this transfer will be shared and described. The importance of collaboration between schools and districts will be emphasized in particular as in many cases transfers are very sudden which was an unexpected finding of our study. The partnership and transfer could be much improved by increased family involvement. In some cases, families do not disclose information regarding special education services provided for their child by the previous school. Finally, individual's views about the transition process will be documented.

The primary objective of this paper is to present information about transitions of special needs students in rural areas. It is important to note that the transition in this paper is the transition from school to school, not from school to work. Topics to be discussed are: 1) the amount of time spent on the bus and the special bus services available, 2) experiences with special education and student services and 3) the interaction between students with special needs and their peers. Relevant views of KUSD and outlying school personnel will be documented. Finally the efficacy of the current system will be evaluated with a desire to improve the current program if necessary.

### Methodology

The information for this paper was collected by members of the RAISE program in Kayenta, Arizona under the supervision of their instructors from NAU-CEE. A set of interview questions were developed for three populations: 1) students, 2) parents, and 3) special education personnel. Seven parents were interviewed as well as 6 students (one 4th grade student, three middle school students and two high school students).

Student interviews were performed after obtaining signed parental consent. Names and identifying information was not documented in order to protect confidentiality. Of the students interviewed, two have visual impairments, one is autistic, one has spina bifida, one has Navajo Neuropathy and the other has a learning disability. This is not a random sample as confidentiality laws and policies limited the researchers' ability to identify students who might be ideal interview candidates. Special education personnel from each of the following KUSD schools were interviewed as well: Kayenta Primary School (KPS), Kayenta Intermediate School (KIS), Kayenta Middle

School (KMS) and Monument Valley High School (MVHS). In addition special education personnel from the outlying schools, Chilchibeto Community School (CCS), Dennehotso Boarding School (DBS), Kayenta Community School (KCS) and Monument Valley High in Utah (MVU) were also contacted. Some cases were obtained from the information shared by school personnel. Informal interviews were conducted with the Transportation Department, various office staff and the Director of Special Education for KUSD.

## **Interview Questions**

### **Special Education Personnel**

1. How many students transfer into/ out of your district? Why?
2. What is done to facilitate the transfers/ transitions?
3. How is the communication between schools?
4. How are the student's families involved in the transition?
5. What accommodations are made in bussing new students with special needs?

### **Parents**

1. Why did you choose to have your child change schools?
2. Would you have preferred that your child stay at the other school? Why or why not?
3. Is the child's current school meeting his or her needs? How?
4. If not, how could they improve your child's service?
5. How do you think the transition went for your child?
6. How does your child get to school?

### **Students**

1. Which school did you like most? Why?
2. What did you experience coming to a new school?
3. How is the new school meeting your needs? If not, what could they do better?
4. What do you like about coming to the new school?

## **Results**

### **General Findings**

Kayenta Unified School District functions as an inclusion model. Most students with special needs spend their school day just like any other student. They ride the regular bus to school, eat breakfast in the cafeteria, play with their peers until the bell rings and attend classes with other students in their grade level. They eat lunch and take elective classes with their peers and are eligible to participate in after school programs. They are bound by the same rules of conduct as the other children in their classes. Even students who require a lot of help are placed in regular classrooms with support as often as possible. Of course there are exceptions. Some students are met at the bus and walked to class. Some spend time in a resource room and are supervised more closely. Some students may give up one elective to receive tutoring services during the day. Our interviews indicated that inclusion has been a fact of life for the children of KUSD for about 10 years. Children with special needs may be generally better accepted by other students here than at other schools.

Other schools generally offer a more varied program including resource rooms and mainstreaming. In these programs, students with special needs are generally more isolated from their peers as they spend more time in a resource room, but may receive better educational services due to smaller class size and specialized help. One of these educators said that while she believes in the benefits of inclusion, teacher and student attitudes at the school do not allow the children a comfortable learning environment in the regular classroom programs. In some cases accommodations are not made for the children by their classroom teachers, and there have been instances when teachers themselves have made hurtful comments.

KUSD busses travel in excess of 2,000 miles per day. The first child is picked up at 5:45 in the morning. The last student riding the school bus home is not dropped off until between 5:45 and 6:00 in the evening. Students are also bussed into Kayenta from communities as far away as Shonto (45 miles). Four-wheel drive busses make numerous stops, and some students spend nearly 4 hours per day on the bus, much of that time on unpaved roads.

Considering that the average lunchtime is at about noon, the child does not receive a meal for at least six hours. Most students with special needs ride regular busses with other students. They are dropped off at the roadside stop and walk to their homes. In some cases the stop is very close to their homes. Yet, in one instance, a boy receiving services walks 1.6 miles to his home. He would like to stay after school for additional reading help, but his family worries about him walking that distance through the desert alone on a dark cold road. There are two special education busses. They are used primarily for the more highly involved students; those who are wheelchair bound, suffer from a seizure disorder or are in some way physically unable to handle the rigors of a full day at school. Those busses provide door to door service and children are not left unless there is someone home. In some cases when roads are not properly maintained, especially after a heavy rain, the bus monitor will have to push the wheelchair through the mud from the school road to the family home.

The results from the survey questions are as follows:

### **Special Education Personnel**

#### **1. *How many students transfer into/ out of your district? Why?***

Local schools lose their entire eighth grade class as a result of promotion to other schools. Very young children may transfer from Head Start or pre-school to kindergarten. There were documented transfers to and from every school for other reasons as well. The number varied, but appeared to correlate somewhat with school size. Sometimes a family moves. KUSD personnel said that people like to send their children to KUSD because of the programs and services available. In addition, KUSD has 2 full time Navajo speaking school psychologists on staff. Other schools contract out to non-native people for their testing. As a result, some children who would be considered in need of special education services by other professionals are not so considered when language and cultural differences between the assessor and child are removed. Schools often do not have information regarding the exact reasons students transfer out. In some cases children transfer several times per year. Some children leave a school because of behavior problems that causes Social Services to become involved and send the student to a residential setting.

#### **2. *What is done to facilitate the transfers/ transitions?***

No school in this study has a transition plan to other schools. Educators say that often parents do not inform the school of their intention to withdraw their child. In one instance, when the home school liaison went to check on the child, he found the house boarded up. Until the new school requests information, schools often have no idea where the child is. Surprisingly there is no transition plan for incoming ninth graders either.

#### **3. *How is the communication between schools?***

Within Kayenta Unified School District there are transition meetings and information is readily transferred from school to school. In some cases, it can take four to five months to receive records from another school. Most schools will share information on a "need to know" basis over the phone, however in many cases written records arrive incomplete and out of order. Most school personnel believe that communication is not good enough, however there was a tendency to put the responsibility for better communication on other schools. "It is the other school's responsibility to help their students transfer in." Two schools felt that they shared good communication and that they worked well together. However, another school in the district did not have that experience.

#### **4. *How are the student's families involved in the transition?***

The general consensus was that for the most part parents and children simply decide to change schools. In some cases they do not inform the new school of any prior services. When parents fail to share this information, it may take months to rediscover the child's learning problem and begin the paperwork that allows the Special Education Department to step in to help the child.

#### **5. *What accommodations are made in bussing new students with special needs?***

No data were found to show any extra accommodations. Accommodations are the same for new students as for continuing students with special needs.

### **Parents**

#### **1. *Why did you choose to have your child change schools?***

Two children had been in a residential facility for students with auditory and visual problems and their families wanted them closer to home. Several families moved into the area as a result of changing family situations. Most children transferred as a result of completing the course of study at their previous school. As we expected and in line with KUSD's assertions that students transfer into the District simply because they "want to come here" or are unhappy with the services provided at the old school, one of these parents gave that as their reason for moving their child.

**2. *Would you have preferred that your child stay at the other school? Why or why not?***

For several parents this question was moot as their child had to change schools as a result of completing the eighth grade, but generally those parents were happy with the services which had been provided. The mother of the children with visual impairments preferred the school that specialized in visual impairment services, but it was just too far away and she has been happy with the services in Kayenta. Two parents responded that they much preferred KUSD to the other school. Only one family preferred their old district.

**3. *Is the child's current school meeting his or her needs? How?***

Six of the parents are happy with the service received from KUSD. They believe the teachers are helpful and that their children are learning valuable life and self care skills as well as receiving instruction in traditional subjects. One parent said that "Ei diigis at'e, bitsiighaa' baadahaz'a." Which basically means that the school tries to help him but he has problems.

**4. *If not, how could they improve your child's service?***

One child transferred into the high school after completing the eighth grade at an outlying school. His paperwork was misplaced at the old school and KUSD was unable to properly place him. He is behind in most subjects and his family wants him to be placed in a reading class. This has not happened and the family believes that their desires have been ignored as "...the new semester started and he is still in classes that are too hard for him." In his old school he spent time in a self contained resource room where help was more readily provided. Another parent said that she would like to see her child protected better from students who tease him.

**5. *How do you think the transition went for your child?***

Most parents say the transition was difficult. Some did not know what happened with their children at school.

**6. *How does your child get to school?***

None of these children ride the Special Education bus. They ride the regular bus, walk or get rides from their parents.

**Students**

**1. *Which school did you like most? Why?***

**2. *What did you experience coming to a new school?***

These questions will be answered together as the responses are interrelated. Most children liked their old school better than the new one. This could be because in many cases the transition was a recent event. Most children had a difficult time making friends. Some experienced bullying and teasing. They had to find their way around a new environment. Some children did not even know how to open their lockers when they arrived. Most like their teachers, but had a difficult time settling in.

**3. *How is the new school meeting your needs? If not, what could they do better?***

Only one child felt that the school was not meeting his/her educational needs. This child would like more individual help. One student would like a large print dictionary. Others liked the school and their teachers. They felt like they were learning and that help was readily available.

**4. *What do you like about coming to school?***

Most of the students do not enjoy coming to school. One of the younger children enjoys the playground equipment and the friends that have been made.

## Conclusion

As in many rural areas, some children in Kayenta spend an excessive amount of time on the bus. Since students with special needs and their non-disabled peers are treated the same with regard to transportation, children who transfer in from the outlying communities may spend a substantial portion of their day on the bus.

When it was discovered that there were no transition plans in place, the researchers asked personnel what could be done. Most outlying schools said they would be willing to bring their eighth grade students to Kayenta to see the high school and meet their teachers ahead of time for an orientation. This would decrease children's tension about where to go and what to do. They would know where to go for help. They would learn where the bathroom, cafeteria and gym were located as well as their classrooms.

While most children had good experiences with the Special Education Department, the transition from a pullout program to one of complete inclusion is hard. Children are often not used to the responsibility of working independently or with minimal assistance.

Children had a difficult time making friends in their new school. This happens for many children who leave the comfort of their old school and transfer to a new place. Most students complained of being teased. It is difficult to know if this is because of their disability or simply because they are new. It has been observed that children from out of town may have a harder time fitting in than those who live in town. Researchers also noticed students with special needs working and playing with their non-disabled peers. In most cases they cannot be told apart. It is the children who look, or walk or act "different" who continue to have a hard time after the transition.

The researchers would like to see all educators assume responsibility for communication and good record keeping. It must be realized that it is the children who pay the price for a few papers stuffed into an envelope and shipped to the new school as incomplete records. It is the child who pays when the paperwork is lost or when sending it out is the last priority. The fact is that once a child withdraws from a school his or her education becomes the responsibility of the new school, but good communication is the responsibility of all participants. In a place like this where there is so much communicating and sharing of information to be done, it is vital.

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